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ABSTRACT

This study investigated during a 2-year period how middle school students spend their time when not in school. Nearly 75 middle school students participated in the study. The subjects' out-of-school activities were first investigated in April of 1997 when subjects were in the fifth grade. The same students were studied again in April 1998 when they were in the sixth grade. The instrument used was specifically designed for gathering information about how children spend their time outside of school from Monday through Sunday. Few differences in activity patterns were found from one year to the next. Watching television was the most prevalent activity, significantly surpassing reading for pleasure, for both years. The study concluded that children spend too much of their time out of school watching television and too little time reading. The findings further indicated that children's television-viewing patterns are set early, causing children to spend less time engaged in meaningful interaction with adults and peers, and is increasingly defining children's identities. Based on the findings, it was suggested that teachers and administrators should make a concerted effort to work with parents on a continual basis and develop programs that require active parent participation in children's literacy development through reading and only selective television viewing at home. (Author/SD)

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HOW MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS SPEND THEIR TIME OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL:

A LONGITUDINAL INVESTIGATION

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Abstract: This study investigated how middle school students spend their time when not in school during a two-year period. Nearly 75 middle school students participated in the study. The subjects' out-of-school activities were first investigated in April of 1997 when they were in the fifth grade. The same students were studied again in April 1998 when they were in the sixth grade. The instrument used was specifically designed for gathering information about how children spend their time outside of school from Monday through Sunday. Few differences were found. Children's activity patterns remained relatively constant. Watching television was the most prevalent activity, significantly surpassing reading for pleasure, for both years.

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Neurological research suggests that children's experiences outside of school, such as visualizing characters when being read a story or playing imaginative games, significantly influence brain development. Since children spend more time outside of formal educational environments than they do in them, the question of how children spend their time outside of school takes on critical importance from an educational perspective. The neurological research being conducted leads to the question of what types of experience are most helpful to a child's growing intellect (Greenspan, 1997).

Although how children spend time in school has been extensively studied,few studies providing information on how children spend their time outside of school have been conducted and no longitudinal investigations have been reported in the literature. Little is known about children's out-of-school activities and the influence they may have on academic achievement. Few researchers have investigated how children spend their time outside of school in terms of intellectually stimulating activities, physical exercise, creative play, or talking with adults.

In one of the three studies reported in the literature, Anderson, Fielding, and Wilson (1988) investigated the relationship between the amount of children's outside reading and reading achievement by having 155 fifth-grade students who participated write down every day how many minutes they spent on a wide range of out-of-school activities. The researchers found that among all the ways children spend their time, reading books was the best predictor of reading achievement. On most days, however, the majority of children did little or no reading.

In the second study, Jones and Blendinger (1997) investigated how 205 kindergarten through fourth grade African-American children in two rural low-socioeconomic schools noted for low academic achievement spend their time when not in school. They found:

1. Watching television was the most prevalent activity.
2. Electronic activities--watching television, watching videotapes, and playing video games--surpassed any other reasonable combination of activities (e.g., playing inside and outside the home).

3. Reading received a relatively high rating but cautioned that the rating might be higher than it normally would be because the children in the study were also involved in an 18 month school-home reading program.

4. Doing homework also received a relatively high rating during the week, but dropped down during the weekend.

5. Watching television was generally the best-liked activity.

6. Activities done with parents during the week and the weekend varied according to the grade level, but watching television, however, was more prevalent than any other activity.

Jones and Blendinger concluded that the outside-of-school activity pattern reported by the African-American children from two rural low-achieving schools indicated the children watched television too much and read too little.

In the third study, Wells and Blendinger (1997) found that:

1. Watching television was the most prevalent activity.

2. Electronic activities--watching television, watching videotapes, and playing video games--surpassed any other reasonable combination of activities (e.g., playing inside and outside the home).

3. Reading received a relatively low activity index rating, but placed third in the best-liked category. It is difficult to advance a reason why the children said they liked reading for pleasure as an activity but didn't read much outside of school.

4. With the exception of watching television, playing outside homework received high activity index ratings.

5. Playing outside was the best-liked activity.

6. Activities done with parents during the week and the weekend varied, but watching television, however, was more prevalent than other activities.

7. Activities mentioned in the category titled "other" varied. The most frequently mentioned activities were sleeping, eating dinner, going to church, baseball practice, gymnastics, and using personal computers.

Wells and Blendinger also concluded from their study that children spend too much time out of school watching television and too little time reading.

Although there is a strong body of research which supports the theory that viewing television violence negatively impacts children's aggressive behavior, the research on

television's interference with reading ability is conflicting. Several cross-sectional, correlational studies indicate negative relationships between amount of television viewing and reading achievement Other studies have supported the theory that television promotes the development of reading skills through practicing reading subtitles displayed on foreign television programs (Beentjes, & van der Voort, 1988).

A three-year panel study completed in 1992, investigated the television viewing habits and reading abilities of approximately 1,000 second and fourth grade children. These children were surveyed again two years later to determine longitudinal effects of television viewing on reading achievement. This new panel study looked at the effect of television viewing over time on reading performance. The results support previous theories that television viewing does exert an inhibitory effect on the development of children's reading comprehension. Support was also found for the hypothesis that subtitled foreign films promote children's decoding skills.There was also evidence that television watching has more of an inhibitory effect on children who are experiencing difficulty with reading than with children who read well (Koolstra, van der Voort, & Tom,1997).

Research Design

To investigate the out-of-school behavior of the children involved in this study, we used the same procedures and instrument that we used in our 1997 study. Nearly 75 middle school students participated in the study. The subjects' out-of-school activities were first investigated in April of 1997 when they were in the fifth grade. The same students were studied again in April 1998 when they were in the sixth grade. The instrument used was specifically designed for gathering information about how children spend their time outside of school from Monday through Sunday. It listed ten mutually exclusive activities (e.g., watching television, reading, doing homework, etc.) and an "other" category which provided an opportunity for the children to name activities in addition to those listed. An icon accompanied the words for each activity.

The children participating in this study attended a middle school in East Central Mississippi with an enrollment of over 850 students in grades 5-8 during the 1997-98 school year. Composition of the student body was 55 percent white, 43 percent African American, and 2 percent other minorities. Approximately 52 percent of the students qualified for free or reduced lunches.

The instrument used to collect data was specifically designed for gathering information about how children spend their time outside of school from Monday through Sunday. It was administered daily to the children for a period of one week.

The instrument listed ten mutually exclusive activities and an "other" category which provided an opportunity for the children to name activities in addition to those listed. The ten categories were:

1. Playing outside
2. Playing inside
3. Games and puzzles
4. Watching television
5. Reading
6. Watching videotapes
7. Paying video games
8. Doing household chores
9. Doing homework
10. Shopping

An icon (picture symbolizing the word) accompanied the words for each activity. The reason for including icons in addition to the words was to assist children who may have difficulty reading.

The form of the instrument used to collect data for the weekday (Monday-Thursday) activities differed slightly from the form used to collect data for the weekend (Friday-Sunday) activities. The weekday form was divided into one-hour time periods ranging from 3:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. The weekend form was designed to gather information about the activities in which children engaged in during the weekend and provided larger time blocks. The weekday form was first administered on Tuesday and dealt with children's activities after school on Monday. The weekend form was administered on the following Monday and addressed Children's activities

during the weekend. In addition to investigating the activities that children engaged in during the week and on the weekend, we also asked:

1. Of all the activities you circled, what did you like to do best?
2. What activities do you like to do with your parents during the week?
3. What activities do you like to do with your parents during the weekend?

In order to insure consistency in data collection, the action researchers adhered to a specific written protocol. The forms were completed by the children during the week in of April €, 1998 designated for the study. On Monday of that week before the children went home, the researchers prepared them for the study. They told the children to think about what they do after school and in the evening because the first thing they would do when they came to school in the morning was complete an activity form about what they did outside of school. For example: What do they do right after they get home form school (3:00-4:00 p.m.)? After they have been home about an hour (4:00-5:00 p.m.)? What do they do before dinner (5:00-6:00 p.m.)? The researchers gave examples and instructed the children they would need to think about when they start and stop doing things. This same procedure was repeated each day.

To analyze the data collected, the total number of times the children reported doing a particular activity (e.g., watching television) during the week and on the weekend was tabulated. A proportional value was given to each activity by dividing the tabulated total for a particular activity by the total number computed for all activities (excluding the other category). This process provided an activity index rating that made it possible to make comparisons among activities, from the activity the students did the most to the activity they did the least.

Findings and Discussion

Data collected are displayed in the table on the following page. The table shows the number of times a particular activity was indicated by the children and its index rating. Numerical scores and index ratings are also presented for (a) best-liked activities, (b) activities done with parents during the week, and (c) activities done with parents on the weekend.

HOW SIXTH GRADE CHILDREN SPEND TIME OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL
IN SELECTED ACTIVITIES BY PROPORTIONAL VALUE

Grade Level	Playing Outside	Playing Inside	Games and Puzzles	Watching TV	Reading	Watching Videotapes	Playing Video Games	Doing Chores	Doing Homework	Shopping
Weekdays										
Grade 6	14.58	8.45	1.16	22.83	5.93	13.33	7.09	7.48	12.00	2.58
Grade 5	22.08	9.32	2.06	23.98	6.54	5.35	6.79	7.21	14.42	2.11
Weekend										
Grade 6	24.9	10.05	2.36	28.99	2.36	7.10	7.69	10.65	2.95	2.95
Grade 5	25.51	10.71	1.57	28.66	4.09	5.83	7.09	7.87	4.72	3.94
Best Liked Activities										
Grade 6	37.83	0	5.40	27.02	2.70	0	5.40	0	5.40	2.70
Grade 5	42.86	1.43	0	17.14	12.66	0	12.86	1.43	5.71	5.71
Activities Done With Parents During the Week										
Grade 6	8.16	2.04	2.05	30.61	8.16	12.24	10.20	0	2.05	12.24
Grade 5	15.04	4.51	7.52	21.80	4.51	18.04	7.52	2.26	3.01	15.79
Activities Done With Parents on the Weekend										
Grade 6	12.04	7.22	4.81	30.12	0	8.43	4.81	12.04	1.20	19.27
Grade 5	14.53	7.69	5.98	24.79	3.42	5.98	6.84	7.69	3.42	19.66

Although many activity patterns changed little from one year to the next, a few, such reading as a best liked activity, varied dramatically. Nine findings especially worth noting are as follows:

1. Watching television varied very little between the 6th grade and 5th grade findings. It was the major activity for both years.
2. Students played outside much more during the week when they were 5th graders than they did as 6th graders.
3. Watching videotapes on weekdays significantly increased during the 6th grade. Weekend watching of videotapes also increased.
4. Participant activity patterns from the 5th grade to the 6th grade varied more during the week than on the weekend.
5. Playing outside remained the best liked activity for the students for both years.
6. Out-of-school reading remained fairly consistent and relatively low for both years.
7. Reading as a "best liked" activity dropped dramatically from the 5th to the 6th grade.
8. Playing outside with parents dipped from the 5th to the 6th grade.
9. Watching television and videotapes with parents increased in the 6th grade.

The Accelerated Reading program was initiated during the 1997-1998 school year at the school where we conducted our research, but the program appeared to have little affect on students' out-of-school reading for pleasure. All 5th and 6th grade teachers received training in this program and an Accelerated Reading period was built into the daily schedule. This period was in addition to the regular reading/language arts period. The school also changed to a modified block schedule during the 1997-1998 school year. The number of daily classes changed from seven 50-miunute periods to five 76-minute periods.

All 5th and 6th grade students were tested at the beginning of the year to determine their reading levels. Each student received a card with this information to assist the librarian in helping the student select appropriate reading material. The grade for the Accelerated Reading class was determined primarily by the number of points a student was expected to earn in a nine-week grading period based on his/her individual reading level. This accounted for 75% of the grade and spelling accounted for 25% of the Accelerated Reading grade.

Approximately 40 minutes out of the 76-minute period were devoted to independent reading. Students kept a reading log with titles of the books they read, amount of daily time spent reading the book, test score, when completed, and points earned. Students also went to the computer lab during this period to take tests on the books as they completed them. They then went to the library to check out another book. In addition to the 40 minutes reading time during the Accelerated Reading class, students were expected to read the first ten minutes of the other four class periods. The average amount of time spent on self-selected reading during school was approximately 80 minutes.

Implications

Our findings underscore the thesis that children spend too much of their time out of school watching television and too little time reading. Our research indicates that children's television-viewing patterns are set early on. There was little difference in the amount of time

spent watching television from fifth grade to sixth grade. On average, 42 percent of out-of-school time was spent on screen-oriented activities--television, video, video games. Our findings are similar to those reported by Jones and Blendinger (1997) and support their contention that children read little outside of school in comparison to watching television. The outside-of-school activity pattern reported, supports the thesis that children watch television too much and read too little.

The significant increase in the amount of in-school time spent on self-selected reading from 5th to 6th grade may have some bearing on the decrease in the amount of time spent reading out of school. There was no specific link to the home where students were expected to read a certain amount of time at home with parents.

Because television viewing is a privatizing experience and much time is devoted to this media, children are spending less time engaged in meaningful interaction with adults and peers. Television viewing is increasingly defining children's identities.

Traditionally teachers have equated literacy with printed material and spend time introducing students to good literature. They teach literary analysis, so that when children do read for pleasure they might choose more challenging reading material. The relatively new area of visual literacy is fast developing in our society, and educators must address this realm of literacy as well as print media. Instead of trying to compensate for the large amount of television viewing by print saturation in school, a better strategy might be to teach about television. If children learned to analyze television in the same manner that they learn to analyze literature, perhaps they would become more discerning in their selection of television programming.

In order for formal education to be most efficient, children's informal educational experiences must be taken into account. This is where children engage with the real world. To balance the inequities in media experiences outside of school, teachers and administrators will have to make a concerted effort to work with parents on a continual basis and develop programs

that require active parent participation in children's literacy development through reading and selective television viewing at home.

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